

truths about themselves and their world, Tolstoy weaves together the images, themes, literary techniques, and biographical facts of a lifetime. In his swan song and “summary epic,” as one scholar has called the work, the writer, now in his seventies, takes us back not only to the Caucasus of his youth, but also to the epic spirit of *War and Peace*.⁷ But *Hadji-Murat* is more than a repetition of an earlier artistic vision. It subsumes the past into an entirely new creation. The tragic-comedic sensibility and exuberant spirit of the young author of *The Cossacks* and *War and Peace* are now expanded into the sublimely tragic vision of an author nearing death.

If Pushkin’s *Eugenii Onegin* (1831) is Russia’s great experimental “novel in verse,” then *Hadji-Murat* is its crowning poem in prose. The aura of legend, of “mythical epic,” as Harold Bloom called it, reverberates through the grime and grit of everyday reality.⁸ The novella unites the tragic and the sublime, the serious and the satirical, in a highly compressed epic framework, while remaining painstakingly true to historical facts, which Tolstoy gleaned from his study of 172 sources. The result is a poetic realism that is unprecedented in Tolstoy or any other Russian writer.

All of Tolstoy’s novels and novellas—even the openly ideological *Resurrection*—offer a transcendent vision while never eschewing life’s rough edges and gaps, or the ebb and flow of the ordinary. Seen through the narrator’s transformative lens, daily reality itself acquires transcendent meaning. Each moment is shown to be both finite and possessed of infinite possibility, both irreducibly distinct and an integral component in the tapestry of human life. The smallest detail takes on larger spiritual significance when seen in the context of the artistic fabric of which it is a part.

ARTIST AND CRITIC: THE “ENDLESS LABYRINTH OF LINKAGES”

In 1876 Tolstoy wrote to his close personal friend the philosopher and literary critic Nikolai Strakhov: “For art criticism we need people who would show the senselessness of looking for ideas in a work of art, but who instead would continually guide readers in that endless labyrinth of linkages that makes up the stuff of art, and bring them to the laws that serve as the foundation for those linkages.”⁹ Even in a career as varied as Tolstoy’s, these words are perhaps the best single expression of the writer’s lifelong artistic and philosophical credo. Tolstoy had a fundamental belief in the wholeness of the universe and in art’s unique capacity to cap-

ture that wholeness. In our postmodernist climate, these beliefs will strike many as both naïve and passé.

In Tolstoy's time, too, the position was unique. In fact, his credo was, in part, a reaction against the radical Russian intelligentsia, who were dominant in Russian social thought in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and who approached literature in precisely the way that Tolstoy opposed. Influential literary critics, such as Nikolai Dobroliubov in his essay "What Is Oblomovitis?" (1860) on Ivan Goncharov's novel *Oblomov* (1859), and Dmitry Pisarev in his essay "Bazarov" (1862) about Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862), read literature as if it were a mere documentary snapshot of contemporary social conditions. On the basis of that snapshot, they extracted a single idea—that the current social order has produced a breed of starry-eyed aristocratic lazybones (Dobroliubov), or that practical, steely-eyed empiricists are the only hope for Russia's future (Pisarev). Each went on to use that one idea to further his own ideological agenda.

This way of reading—reducing a work of art to a statement of ideology rather than seeing it as a complex and organically unified vision of life—was anathema to Tolstoy. He believed that it stemmed from the vulgar utilitarianism and antiritualism characteristic of the radical intelligentsia. In their worldview, the spiritual strivings that are fundamental to Tolstoy's conception of man become irrelevant. The radicals also mocked Tolstoy's faith in the power of the artist to transcend the limits of ordinary consciousness in order to discover a higher, purposeful order.

Tolstoy was not alone in his distaste for the radical intelligentsia. His contemporary Ivan Turgenev referred to Pisarev and Dobroliubov as the "snake and the rattlesnake."¹⁰ And Nikolai Strakhov, who was one of the foremost practitioners of the so-called organic criticism, frequently expressed to Tolstoy his rejection of the radicals' belief that science can replace morality, religion, and literature in providing answers to man's ultimate questions.¹¹ Strakhov and Tolstoy both believed that insight into human life required an "organic," suprarational kind of thinking, which is beyond the reach of scientific reasoning, but attainable by the creative artist.

At least this was what Tolstoy believed *some* of the time. After his spiritual crisis and conversion in 1878, his views as a literary critic seem to have been written by someone else altogether. In his well-known theoretical treatise "What is Art?" published in 1897, Tolstoy writes about art in just the manner he condemned in his letter to Strakhov. He offers a rigid theorem about two categories of art: "good art" and "bad art." "Good

art,” he argues, “infects” its recipients with “good,” moral, Christian ideals. “Bad art” lacks this Christian underpinning. It infects for the sake of infection alone. It only titillates the senses and thus reinforces the spiritually bankrupt status quo of modern secular life. Rather than encouraging spiritual communion, secular art maintains and even intensifies the separation of human beings from one another and from God.

Tolstoy’s narrow definition of art in “What is Art?” leads the writer to the preposterous conclusion that his own *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, Shakespeare’s plays, and all of Beethoven fail to infect audiences with “good” Christian feelings, and are therefore to be relegated to history’s trash heap of “bad art.” Not surprisingly, then, the openly didactic and illustrative fiction of Tolstoy’s later years transforms the all-encompassing vision of life in his earlier novels into a narrowly moralistic one. We need only consider the works of late didactic fiction, such as “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” (1886), “God Sees the Truth but Waits” (1872), and “Alyosha the Pot” (1905), to recognize the contrast between the circumscribed, hortatory worldview of the artist-as-preacher and the immense, life-embracing vision of the creator of *War and Peace*.

The earlier artist is, as Henry James aptly called him, “a reflector as vast as a natural lake; a monster harnessed to his great subject—all of life!”¹² The author of the later didactic fiction and moral treatises is more like a fixed, furious warning beacon, a preacher harnessed to his bully pulpit. True, such works of late fiction as *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1886) and “Master and Man” (1895) astound readers with their compact intensity. But they do not “force people to love life in all its innumerable, inexhaustible manifestations,” as Tolstoy, in an 1865 letter to the novelist P. D. Boborykin, said art should do.¹³

In these later masterpieces of tendentious fiction, Tolstoy does not celebrate life’s holism for its own sake, as he does in his earlier works. He does not discover in an imperfect world a higher poetic truth. Rather, he extracts from the world clear moral maxims. The beginning of this tendency can be felt at the end of *Anna Karenina*, more distinctly in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, and most intensely in *Resurrection*.

The later Tolstoy sometimes diminishes the very complexity that makes the quest of the characters of his earlier novels so engrossing to readers. The early, searching characters constantly strive for a perfection they can never quite achieve, for a truth that never presents itself to them in clear, rigid formulations. They live in a fictional world in which it is impossible to proclaim a single religious, moral, or intellectual truth as the novel’s ultimate “meaning.” How, after all, can we extract a moral or religious

idea—or any idea—from *War and Peace*, that supramoral, pantheistic meditation on the beauty of *everything* life offers?

In the novels he wrote before *Resurrection*, Tolstoy illuminates the endless process by which human beings strive, as the author himself did, to construct from the parts a vision of the whole, a vision of the ideal amidst the real.¹⁴ The truth contained in *The Cossacks*, *War and Peace*, and the first seven parts of *Anna Karenina* is always shifting and unfolding, like the complex beauty of a diamond that refracts light viewed from multiple perspectives into a rainbow of gorgeous colors. And at the same time, like a diamond, each novel consists of the same solid, organically unified material.

The Cossacks and *War and Peace* pulsate with lifelike dynamism, like the vibrating, shimmering ball of Pierre's dream. *Anna Karenina* is an architecturally tight novel, recreating the sense of entrapment felt by many of the characters themselves, who are forced to find their path in a new world that has been suddenly foisted upon them. If *The Cossacks* and *War and Peace* celebrate their young characters' quest to embrace the fullness of life, and *Anna Karenina* describes their search for a system of values that can give meaning to human life in a society that is crumbling socially and spiritually, then *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and *Resurrection* describe the individual's tortuous journey back to spiritual health in a world that has already fallen.

Ivan allegorically poses the question that Tolstoy asked directly in his *Confession*: "Is there any meaning in my life that will not be destroyed by my inevitably approaching death?"¹⁵ In this harrowing and humane novella, Tolstoy presents his answer in the metaphorical Passion of the title character: only by vigorously casting off the internalized falsehoods of modern society can an individual find the divine spark within and reestablish his connection with the human family.

Resurrection communicates this same point by piercing readers' hearts and stirring their moral imagination with the sharp sword of documentary truth. In this, his most ideological novel, Tolstoy brilliantly combines tentatiousness with astounding psychological realism. The author's moral position is absolutely clear on every page, and yet the portrait of Russian society in spiritual decay is so truthfully and fully developed that the moral solutions offered at the end do not seem too extreme an antidote. Part journalism, part preaching, *Resurrection* nevertheless remains art of the highest order. Unlike many of Tolstoy's later publicist essays and religious treatises, *Resurrection* represents a brilliant synthesis of the ideologue and the artist—a unique achievement that distinguishes Tolstoy from any other Russian writer.